

The Sign of the Cross

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen".

Catholics grow up making the sign of the cross. It is second nature to us. We place our left hand on our chest, and we move our right hand to our forehead as we say, "In the name of the Father"; then we move our right hand to our chest as we say, "and of the Son"; and as we move our right hand from left to our right shoulders we say, "and of the Holy Spirit." Then we join our hands together as we say, "Amen."

We begin and end our prayers with the sign of the cross. The sign of the cross began at Calvary when Christ first made it by hanging on the cross. The early Christians often traced a small cross on their foreheads, and it was for them, as it is for us today, a sign of faith.

What is the History of the Sign of the Cross?

The early Christians have left us many things. One of these things was the sign of the cross. It identified them as followers of Christ, just as it does for us today. They were persecuted greatly, and had to hide the fact that they were Christians. They used to identify themselves by tracing a cross on the ground with a stick or their sandal, and then quickly wipe it out. Tracing a cross on the forehead became popular almost from the very beginning of Christianity. Tertullian, who died about A.D. 230, said, "In all our actions, when we come in or go out, when we dress, when we wash, at our meals, before resting to sleep, we make on our forehead the sign of the cross. These practices are not committed by a formal law of scripture, but tradition teaches them, custom confirms them, and faith observes them".

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, who died around A.D. 386, said, "Let us not be ashamed to confess the Crucified. Be the cross our seal, made with boldness by our fingers and on our brow and in everything: over the bread we eat, and the cups we drink; in our goings out and our comings in; before our sleep, when we lie down and when we awake; when we are travelling, and when we are at rest. Make it on your forehead so that the devils, at sight of the standard of the King, may flee away trembling".

St. Jerome, who died in A.D. 420, said that the sign of the cross was sometimes made on the lips. Prudentius, a Christian poet who died in A.D. 405, mentioned that the sign was made on the chest. The small sign of the cross was commonly used by the end of the 4th century.

In the 5th and 6th centuries, a heresy or false teaching, called the Monophysite Heresy, spread. It taught that Christ had only one nature. The Christians, who believed what the Apostles had taught, wanted to emphasize that Christ had two natures -- His divine nature and His human nature. It was suggested that people make a large cross with two fingers (signifying the two natures of Christ). That custom is observed even today when the Pope gives his blessing, with two fingers extended, in St. Peter's in Rome.

In different places, during the following years, the sign of the cross was made with three fingers extended, in honor of the Blessed Trinity (Three Persons in One God). The other two fingers were bent to the palm of the hand to signify that Christ had two natures -- a human nature and a divine nature.

At Mass, the sign of the cross was made in any of three ways:

1. With three fingers -- in honor of the Blessed Trinity (three Persons in One God).
2. With one finger -- in honor of the Oneness of God.

3. With five fingers extended, as we do today, in honor of the five wounds of Christ.

In the 13th century, Pope Innocent III decreed that the sign of the cross should be made with three fingers from the forehead to the chest, and from the right to the left shoulder. At a later date, the whole hand was used, and the direction changed from the left to the right shoulder. Even today, in the Byzantine Rite (they are joined to the Catholic Church), they join the thumb and first two fingers and move from the forehead, to the chest, to the right, and then to the left shoulder. All other Catholics join their five fingers and touch their forehead, chest, left shoulder, and right shoulder.

While one is making this sign, the words used have differed over the years. Some of the older prayers were: "In the Name of the Holy Trinity"; "In the Name of Jesus of Nazareth"; and so on.

What Does the Sign of the Cross Mean?

It sums up the teaching of Christ, and especially brings out to us the fact that there are three Persons in One God (Blessed Trinity), and the fact that Christ died on the cross for us.

Before the priest reads the Gospel at Mass, he makes the sign of the cross on his forehead, lips, and chest. Why?

- The sign of the cross on the forehead indicates that we believe in the good news of the Gospel.
- The sign of the cross on the lips indicates that we must preach the Gospel by word of mouth.
- The sign of the cross on the chest indicates that we must treasure the word of God in our hearts.

Fr. Almire Pichon, a Jesuit priest, once said, "I believe that if our signs of the cross were always made as if in the presence of God, rather than as if we were chasing away flies, they would open for us the heart of God. Each sign of the cross brings us nearer to God. For each sign of the cross well made, there is one added degree of eternal glory. Each sign of the cross made with devotion deposits within your heart another degree of love, which you would not have had without it."

The Sign of the Cross and Us

We make the sign of the cross as we pass in front of the Catholic Church to indicate our belief that Jesus is really present in that Church in the Blessed Sacrament, and we want to honor Him. We make the sign of the cross when we get up, at work, at play, before and after meals, and as often as we can. It reminds us of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the fact that Jesus died on the cross for us.

The sign of the cross can help us in times of temptation. The book, "The Imitation of Christ" says, "If you confide in the Lord, strength will be given you from heaven, and the world and the flesh shall be made subject to you. Neither will you fear your enemy, the devil, if you be armed with faith and signed with the cross of Christ."

St. Hippolytus, who lived in the 3rd century said, "When tempted, always reverently seal your forehead with the sign of the cross. For this sign of the Passion is displayed and made manifest against the devil if you make it in faith, not in order that you may be seen by men, but by your knowledge putting it forward like a shield."

The sign of the cross is made while all of the seven Sacraments are being given, during the Mass, when a priest gives his blessing, in times of temptation, etc. From the beginning of Christianity, the sign of the cross was a badge of identification, a shield in times of temptation, a demonstration of belief in the Blessed Trinity and Christ's death on the cross. Our early brothers and sisters believed what the first Christian Emperor of Rome saw in a vision **"In this sign you shall conquer."**

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